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ABSTRACT

Rural education research has been misunderstood, underfunded, and discouraged, and the resulting collection of work has suffered for it, according to many observers. Various studies--notably, analyses by the U.S. Department of Education itself--identify significant deficiencies in the national body of research on rural schools. Now the federal apparatus for funding educational research is under intense scrutiny and targeted for reform, with proposals expected from both Congress and the Department of Education. The Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) is the principal source of federal aid for educational research. OERI's research program has been criticized for its lack of definition, lack of coordination among its Regional Educational Laboratories and Research and Development Centers, and inadequate dissemination of useable information to schools. While changes to OERI are expected, it remains questionable whether they will address the research needs of rural communities and schools. Instead, information gatherers are increasingly being directed toward "problem-centered" research with the broadest possible applications, effectively consolidating research and abandoning responsibility for rural and other "targeted" populations. This paper discusses common deficiencies in rural education research, some causes for these deficiencies, OERI contributions to rural research (and lack of follow-up), and suggestions for rural advocates. (Contains 25 references.) (SV)

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Where Has All the 'Rural' Gone?

Rural Education Research and Current Federal Reform

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A Report to the Rural School and Community Trust

March 2001

Like the traditional American farmer, the rural education researcher appears to be something of an "endangered species." Rural education research has been misunderstood, underfunded, unencouraged and, taken as a whole, the resulting collection of work has suffered for it, according to many observers. A variety of studies — notably, analyses supported by the U.S. Department of Education itself — identify significant deficiencies in the national body of research, including available raw data, on rural schools.

Now, in the early days of the George W. Bush administration, the federal apparatus for funding educational research is under intense scrutiny and targeted for reform. The 107th Congress can be expected to offer new proposals, as will the Education Department, which already has made recent modifications to its research office. Will these new changes ultimately help us learn more about rural education? Or will they make perennially scarce resources for high-quality rural research seem more out-of-reach than ever?

Time and again, rural areas have been declared the orphaned "stepchild" of the national education research program, which has largely failed to adequately identify and address conditions specific to them. Moreover, when attention is paid to "rural," it is more often for the sake of a representative sampling than for learning something more substantive about rural schools. Many education researchers are unable to shed or even recognize their own urban biases, and too often assess rural communities in terms of inadequacy, as opposed to their assets. All this contributes to the deficiency of data and conclusive intelligence. Just as poverty of capital resources causes physical suffering, the lack of solid information about "rural" — in an age that purportedly values information above all else — causes many rural communities to endure lessons of contemporary education reform learned "the hard way."

This situation is unfortunate for all, because — aside from the fact that almost 7 million U.S. students (16.7 percent of all) attend some 22,400 rural schools (28 percent of U.S. schools)[1] — rural districts have valuable stories to tell. A 1994 report by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of

[1] Stern, Joyce, Ed. "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research an Improvement, Programs for the Improvement of Practice (1994). p. 14

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Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), pointed out that rural schools often serve as the "proving grounds" for a range of educational innovation:

> Many so-called 'innovations' being championed today were born of necessity long ago in the rural schoolhouse...Cooperative learning, multi-grade classrooms, intimate links between school and community, interdisciplinary studies, peer tutoring, block scheduling, the community as the focus of study, older students teaching younger ones, site-based management...all characterize rural and small school practices.[2]

Administered by an Assistant Secretary of Education and an appointed Policy Board, OERI is the principal source of federal funding for education research, development and dissemination. The federal allocation for OERI activities in 2001 is $722 million, compared with $591.4 million in FY 2000. Of this, $120.6 million is earmarked for education research and dissemination, including support for 12 Research and Development Centers (R&D Centers), overseen by the office's five National Research Institutes. Ten Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) — responsible for research development and regional technical assistance — embarked in January 2001 under new five-year contracts, cumulatively appropriated $65 million. OERI also operates the National Library of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics.[3]

The Department of Education, OERI and its policy board have long been on the receiving end of substantial criticism, and from all points of the political compass. The federal research program has taken hits in recent years for its lack of definition, lack of coordination among education labs and R&D Centers and its inadequate dissemination of useable information to schools.

"When researchers take little or no responsibility for making things work," said one report, "and practitioners eschew the development of explanatory systems for how and why things work or not, neither research nor practice benefits."[4]

Its defenders contend that the funding allocated for educational research is abysmally small, considering the scope and importance of the mandate.

"We have found that lack of focus is one of the key problems hindering the effectiveness and widespread utilization of education research," a Clinton education official told Congress. "With the best of intentions, we are trying to cover a lot of ground with very limited resources. If we, as an education research agency, hope to develop objective evidence and information about promising approaches needed by policymakers and educators, we must focus our research efforts on key areas."[5]

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[2] Ibid. p. 1.

[3] Other budgeted programs apply to other aspects of the OERI mission than research, including "distribution," or improvement, and statistics gathering: The Fund for the Improvement of Education (ESEA X-A) - $339 million; activities associated with the Eisenhower Professional Development program - $23 million; items under National Assessment (NESA) - $40 million; Statistics gathering - $80 million; National writing project - $10 million; etc.

[4] "Improving Student Learning: A Strategic Plan for Education Research and Its Utilization" (National Academy Press), as cited in "Gorillas in Our Midst: Emerging Themes on How to Improve Education Research." (AERA-Analysis, September 1999) http://www.aera.net/gov/rpn/n-06.htm. 7/5/00, 5:35 PM.

[5] Testimony of C. Kent McGuire before the 106th Congress.
http://www.house.gov/ed_workforce/hearings/106th/ecyf/oeri5400/mcguire.htm August 4, 2000, 8:06 PM.

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The criticism of OERI has forced widespread introspection and proposed restructuring (some say "overhaul") by the nation's education research program. It does appear that President Bush will spare the federal Education agency from budget cutting.[6] It remains questionable, however, whether or not recent and current changes can adequately address the research needs of rural communities and schools.

The Challenges of Rural Education Research

Research that specifically examines rural education is, in a word, scant (Haas, 1992; Mulkey, 1993; Stern, 1994). Those working in the field consistently voice frustration with the body of existing data and literature. School consolidation provides a good example. Consolidation is an issue with high-stakes consequences for policymakers and local communities, evoking ongoing debate in many rural communities. Yet, datasets from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) do not contain longstanding information on the history or processes of school consolidation. The use of local curriculum is another issue unaddressed by data gatherers.[7]

Consolidation is an issue with high-stakes consequences for policymakers and local communities, evoking ongoing debate in many rural communities. Yet, datasets from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) do not contain longstanding information on the history or processes of school consolidation.

Missing information of this kind not only keeps us from learning more answers. It keeps us from asking the right questions. More solid and dependable information from and about rural schools would increase their ability to present a unified, powerful rural America to legislators and other policy makers. The lack of data insures that many rural issues will continue to be ignored.

"Lack of adequate research and impact evaluations, together with definitional inconsistencies severely limit policy makers' ability to know either the effect of federal, state, and local programs on rural schools or whether rural interests are being equitably addressed," wrote Joyce Stern in "The Condition of Education in Rural America" (1994). "Until this deficiency is corrected, policy making on behalf of rural students will be impeded."

As Stern and others have pointed out, intense study of rural schools has suffered from a lack of consistent support by government and academic institutions, largely due to: 1) lack of appreciation for urban-rural differences; 2) lack of academic appeal comparable to the excitement generated for urban work; 3) relatively little networking in the professional and research communities around rural education research; 4) a paucity of professionals devoting their careers to continuous study of rural education; 5) longstanding lack of consensus concerning rural education's domain and research priorities; and, finally, 6) a lack of the sense of crisis associated with urban schools, and the accompanying focus by policy makers.

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[6] Pianin, Eric and Kessler, Glenn. "Bush Is Aiming To Cut Spending: Sources Say Defense and Education Would Be Spared in Budget Tightening" Washington, DC: Washington Post. February 10, 2001. p. 1.

[7] Huang, Gary G. "National Data for Studying Rural Education: Elementary and Secondary Education Applications." ERIC Digest. Charleston, West Virginia: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. 1995. ERIC document ED383518

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"[P]olicy makers frequently do not even agree on what constitutes a rural school district," wrote Eric Larsen in 1993. "At the moment, the most common definition belongs to the U.S. Bureau of the Census."[8] [The Census currently defines "rural" as a residual category of places "outside urbanized areas, in open country, or in communities with less than 2,500 inhabitants," or where the population density is "less than 1,000 inhabitants per square mile."[9]]

"There is...little hard evidence on how rural schools differ from their urban counterparts," Larsen wrote, "or on how rural schools are impacted by economic and social differences between rural and urban areas or by differences among rural areas."

Rural people, at least, "know when they are rural," a researcher wrote in 1988. In today's age of telecommuters, retail chains and small-farm shutdowns, however, even this comes into doubt. Claudette Morton, director of the Montana Small Schools Alliance, recalls an incident that occurred some years ago, while she was working for Western Montana College's Rural Education Center. The rural center had been in operation for some time before faculty members began objecting to the name.

"They thought it was terrible to say 'rural,'" Morton recalled. "They thought it meant 'hick!'...That's an issue we haven't come to grips with — just the connotations of the word."

Increasingly, multiple types of "rural" are creeping into the public consciousness. High profile and divergent stories of development erode the notion that "rural" refers only to farm communities where a diminishing number of people reside. The Federal Reserve Bank notes a measurable divide in rural economic performance, showing that almost all rural economic growth during the 1990s was captured by forty percent of rural counties. [These growth havens are nearly always near major cities, have striking scenic amenities, or are emerging hubs of rural commerce. Hundreds of other counties struggle with only modest gains at best, remaining tied to their traditional economic bases, the bank said.][10]

"We do need a better definition of 'rural' and the different kinds of 'rural.' There is 'poor rural' and 'wealthy rural.' There's 'rural' with no minorities, and 'rural' with high minorities."
--Mike Arnold, researcher

Economists have witnessed enough change in the rural economic landscape to pose serious questions about the future for rural people and their communities — an exploration that has prompted the Federal Reserve to establish its own national rural research center. The same realities certainly hold true for education, or should.

"We do need a better definition of 'rural' and the different kinds of 'rural,' observed researcher Mike Arnold, of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory. "There is 'poor rural' and 'wealthy rural.' There's 'rural' with no minorities, and 'rural' with high minorities. There's 'rural' with high limited English proficiency...[and] big rural communities versus small rural communities. In some parts of the country a community of 20,000 might be considered rural while, in most of the Great Plains, that would be a major community."

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[8] Larsen, Eric. "A Survey of the Current Status of Rural Education Research (1986-1993)" Florida, 1993. ERIC Document. ED366482 p. 2.
[9] Stern, Joyce, Ed. "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research an Improvement, Programs for the Improvement of Practice (1994). p 4.
[10] Press release: "Rural policy must embrace broader issues." Kansas City: Federal Reserve Bank/Center for the Study of Rural America, October 14, 1999. http://www.kc.frb.org/PUBAFFRS/PRESSREL/ruralrelease.html

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Arnold and others point out that it is still fairly common to see research comparing data under the "urban-versus-rural" standard without controlling for other differences.

"The variables of small scale, isolation, and sparsity of population are still not considered important by many researchers, and most studies ignore them," wrote Stern (1994). "Another problem concerns stereotypical images of rural life that inhibit understanding the wide diversity that exists not only across regions of the country but even within states."

"I don't see anybody really concentrating on this issue," said Arnold. "I think people are still set in the 'declining enrollment' perspective. There are different types of rural whose needs and problems tend to get masked by lumping them all together. ...A key [element] to ensuring that all children living in rural areas receive a high-quality education is moving past the consolidation debate and engaging in a critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of rural schools. The goal should be to address the weaknesses by building upon the strengths."

In addition to the need for new and better information, at least one researcher proposes that more could be done by closer inspection of existing work. Mary Jean Herzog, co-secretary/treasurer of the Rural Education Special Interest Group (RE/SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) favors "taking regular education questions or community questions and putting them in a rural context."

"There hasn't much been teased out of the existing data," said Herzog, a member of the faculty of Western Carolina University. She added that a general lack of "rural" sensibility among researchers fosters less-than-ideal projects. "People will do a study in a rural area and think this makes it a rural study; but they aren't necessarily the same thing."

The challenges of rural research appear enmeshed in demographics, politics and diminishing returns. All current federal education R&D Centers are located with major universities, largely in metropolitan areas. A summer 2000 review of research project descriptions and titles available on centers' web pages revealed one study focusing exclusively on rural issues, and few that contained any mention of "rural" at all. Even among those studies showing interest in rural education, the attention appeared cursory. One study claimed to explore contrasts between "schools serving relatively affluent, suburban communities and schools thought to be potentially at risk: those serving inner-city, economically disadvantaged communities and those in more geographically remote rural areas." The study examined nine inner-city schools, compared with only two rural ones "because inner-city students were considered most at risk."[11]

"Most of the national personalities in education today spring from urban and academic settings," wrote Stern in 1995. "It is no understatement to say that most of them do not see rural schools as where the action is; some even fail to take them into account.... [T]he problems of urban

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[11] Herman, Joan L. Klein, Davina C.D. and Wakai, Sara T. "Assessing Equity in Alternative Assessment: An Illustration of Opportunity-to-Learn Issues." CSE Technical Report 440 CRESST/University of California, Los Angeles; Tamela Heath, University of Maryland, College Park. December 1996. National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST); Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE), Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

society and the sheer mass of the population involved challenge these thinkers and innovators to focus on urban settings. This needs to change..."[12]

Oliver Moles, a research analyst at OERI's National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students (the "At Risk" Institute), admits that "the rural stuff doesn't get to the fore very much, so there isn't as much available [about the changing nature of 'rural']."

Attention to rural education is, however, part of OERI's Congressional mandate and, ostensibly, the responsibility of the "At Risk" Institute. During the last reauthorization of the office in 1994, Congress ordered OERI to establish programs raising participation by groups of researchers and institutions "that have been historically underutilized in Federal educational research activities," including colleges and universities "located in rural areas" as well as "institutions and researchers located in States and regions...which have historically received the least Federal support for educational research and development."[13]

To those in the field, however, major federal funding for rural research is more often tied to agriculture than education. The ongoing lack of federal grant opportunities sends universities and faculty members away from rural education research toward better-supported areas of study.

"If you want a research base, you need Ph.D.s working on doctorates, but how many people are working on doctorates in Rural Education?" --Claudette Morton

"If you want a research base, you need Ph.D.s working on doctorates, but how many people are working on doctorates in Rural Education?"

"There aren't that many people who are doing systematic, empirical investigations of rural education questions," agreed Theodore Coladarci, editor of the Journal of Research in Rural Education. "If you look at all education research...the percentage of studies being reported that deal with rural schools as the focus of the study — not studies that happen to take a rural sample — is just a small percentage."

Herzog, of AERA's Rural Education Special Interest Group (RE/SIG), proposed "more collaboration" as a means of boosting the meager rural education research base.

"Everybody has been spread out," she observed. "Rural education has been marginalized forever. We're not real popular."

"The problem for 'rural' is that it's usually one person doing something in one place," Morton agreed. "When that person goes, there's no one to take his place."

Arnold proposed cultivating good researchers working in rural areas through an annual symposium, which would bring young scholars together with more experienced researchers for work on specific projects.

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[12] Stern, Joyce. "Reflections of a Recently Retired Federal Analyst in Rural Education." Rural Education Newsletter, Supplement. Spring 1995. n.p.

[13] "Goals 2000: Educate America Act." (H.R.1804). 103rd U.S. Congress, Second Session. 1994. IX, Part C, Sec. 931 (c) (5) (D)

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"They don't even have to come from education," he said. "They could come for other disciplines...Build up the number of rural researchers out there, while improving the quality of research."

Of course, funding is needed to draw good researchers and their graduate students into rural areas, away from "where the action is." Funding needs increase for any rural project that can be called "national" in scope, not to mention a rural education research center of the kind established by the Federal Reserve, as proposed by some rural advocates.

FIS Grants

The Institutes maintain another granting program, the Field-Initiated Studies (FIS) Program which, although extremely competitive, is potentially more open to "smaller players" than the R&D Centers. Topics and methods of study for FIS grants are "generated by the investigators, including teachers and other practitioners," according to the 2000 FIS guidelines. Research projects may be for basic or applied research, for development, planning, assessments, evaluations, investigations, experiments and demonstrations in education or other fields related to education. The FIS guidelines suggest the grants are open to colleges and universities, state and local education agencies, public and private organizations and agencies, and even individuals.

Twenty FIS awards totaling $21.3 million were made in 1999; only ten awards totaling $7.8 million were made in 2000. More often than not, the grants go to institutes of higher learning — often large, urban ones.[14] A few successful applications from these years compare programs or data between rural and urban schools, but no effort was spent, for example, on differentiating rural areas experiencing growth from those that have been in steady decline.

"I found there were other places [than the FIS Program] to do business," said rural researcher Claudette Morton, adding that she had tried "a couple of times" as a university faculty member to apply for rural-focused FIS grants, "but I've never gotten anywhere." Based on the grants that were funded, she sensed that the panelists were "not very turned-on to 'rural'."

More recently, however, Mike Arnold served on the pool of reviewers for FIS grants, and was under the impression that "they don't get many rural proposals." OERI staff confirmed that none of the 2000 FIS grants went to rural-specific projects, and suspected the number of rural-focused proposals was few, if there were any.

"It's wide open, compared to other areas," said the McREL researcher, adding that "virtually anybody" (including labs) may apply. As has been pointed out, however, the grants often go to large, urban institutions. In 1999, for example, the University of Michigan alone received four of twenty FIS grants awarded nationally. [Perhaps significantly, U of M hosts a national OERI R&D Center, the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA).]

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[14] Interestingly, FY2000 marked a subtle change in granting. Four of the ten FIS grants awarded went to private or nonprofit institutes: the Urban Institute (two grants), the Erickson Institute (Chicago), and Gottfredson Associates (Baltimore). Others went to North Carolina State University, Arizona State University, University of Southern California, Utah State University and Columbia University.

At least one OERI staff member suggested that any rural FIS proposal would be strengthened by collaboration with a larger, "well-established" institution. The 2000 FIS guidelines supported such partnerships:

> The Secretary encourages collaboration in the conduct of research. For example, researchers may collaborate with practitioners; less experienced researchers may collaborate with more experienced researchers; and major research universities and institutions may collaborate with historically underrepresented institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities. (p.10)

"They tell you that being attached to a major university gives [an application] greater credibility," said Claudette Morton. "Here, out West, that means 'Stanford'.... You don't think of a university that has a rural focus. Major universities just don't do that much in the way of rural research. I'm not sure there are that many that do *anything* in rural. And the ones that do aren't considered to be 'major' universities."

An OERI staff member recognized the dilemma, adding the notion that, in joining a major institution, "you might also have your program gobbled up..."

One recent OERI change means that FIS allocations will not be dedicated beforehand to the individual Institutes, according to the Department of Education, which said applicants will be drawing instead from one big "pot," raising the risk for projects that don't seem to be broad-based. As it was, FIS granting policy already discouraged "targeted" groups (such as rural) with its first criterion: that successful field-initiated projects have "national significance." Research proposals focusing on issues that deal with "targeted populations" are certainly challenged to meet this "national significance" test.

"There is more opportunity [for bigger grants, undefined by traditional Institute guidelines]," a staff member confirmed. "But they will not do priorities [for funding]. There will be fewer awards, larger awards...but you can still gamble."

Admittedly, the FIS program has been more open than most to a wider variety of researchers and organizations. This may have put the program itself at risk, however. Education Department staff indicated that all field-initiated research has been targeted for criticism by policy makers for whom education policy — including research — is more comfortably determined "from the top down." FIS grant guidelines were issued in February 2001, however, with an application deadline in April.

So: What IS Being Done in Washington?

While Congress did express specific concern for rural areas when it last authorized OERI in 1994, the nature of its expression deserves scrutiny. The 1994 authorization pointed out that rural schools "enroll a disproportionately large share of the poor and at-risk students of the United States and yet often lack the means to address effectively the needs of these children…Intensive efforts should be made to overcome the problems of geographic isolation, declining population, inadequate financial resources and other impediments to the educational success of children residing in rural areas."

The legislation, then, created a strong link between rural locations and "students at risk." In so doing, Congress virtually equated rural areas with an educational deficiency and placed responsibility for all rural education matters with OERI's overextended "At Risk" Institute. Thus, issues specific to non-urban educators and their communities have: 1) been categorized as "at risk," discouraging funding for examinations of extra-"at-risk" elements of rural schools by the Institute's funded R&D Centers or other programs; and 2) slipped between the cracks of the "At Risk" Institute. Also to the detriment of rural research, the Institutes, including "At Risk" have witnessed consolidation of both FIS funding, as explained above, and the Research and Development Centers. The OERI Institutes once supported twenty-seven R&D Centers; only twelve centers were funded in 2000. Cutting the federal research "pie" into fewer, larger pieces has further discouraged specialized examination of "priority populations" like "rural."

Existing federal legislation creates a strong link between rural locations and 'students at risk.' In so doing, Congress virtually equated rural areas with an educational deficiency.

The 107th Congress is slated to consider reauthorization of OERI in 2001. One reauthorization bill, introduced during the 106th Congress by Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE), called for significant changes to the research office, even as it reauthorized its mandate. The "Scientifically-Based Education Research, Evaluation, Statistics, and Information Act of 2000" (H.B. 4875) proposed "significant restructuring of the current system" to target the threat of "wide dissemination of flawed, untested educational initiatives." Under the legislation, OERI would have been be replaced by a National Academy for Education Research, Statistics, Evaluation, and Information, comprising different centers for research, evaluation, and statistics.

The legislation also sought to reform the regional education laboratories, which already have seen recent change resulting from their "recompetition" and recontracting process, completed at the beginning of 2001. New "national leadership areas" of interest place a strong emphasis on standards-based education and reform, while previous topic specialties (such as "Rural Education" and "Urban Education") have been eliminated. [New, more general "leadership areas" include: Educational Leadership, Expanding Learning Opportunities, Family and Community Involvement, Re-Engineering Schools for Improvement, Standards-Based Educational Practice, and Teacher Development.]

In making these changes, the Department of Education referred to 1999 evaluations that cited the labs for inconsistent attention to their specialties.[15] Rural Education, as a specialty area, was the responsibility of the Appalachian Education Laboratory (AEL), based in Charleston, West Virginia. [By way of disclosure, the author has done contract writing for AEL.] AEL's assessment suggested that its "deep" involvement supporting regional schools may have hindered its ability to establish itself as a national leader in rural education, reflecting an "absence of vision" in this area, according to one panelist.

"This lack of clarity can present difficulties for those in rural areas in other parts of the country that do not share the same attributes as Appalachian rural areas," said the 1999 report,[16] in a rare acknowledgement of different kinds of "rural."

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[15] Discussion Paper. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. January 2000. http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/issues/1-20.html. (August 5, 2000, 1:31 PM.)

[16] "Interim Evaluation of the Regional Educational Laboratories." Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. December 1999.

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It is not clear, however, how abolishing "Rural Education" as a field of interest establishes new vision or leadership — especially in a field that has been traditionally plagued by the absence of any "single large-scale study with a unitary definition."[17] The review panel's criticism of AEL, in fact, applies to many (if not all) of the RELs which, for whatever reason, were stretched by sometimes-competing allegiances to regional constituencies and larger specialty areas. OERI's response reflects a certain "weigh-in" on the side of the generic, leaving the responsibility for designing programs serving rural communities up to individual labs. Staff members at the Office of Reform Assistance and Dissemination (ORAD), which oversees them, emphasize that all the labs are now required to attend to the needs of "rural," even though Rural Education is no longer designated as a leadership area.

"In developing plans...[each] Laboratory shall pay particular attention to the needs of schools with high concentrations of low-income students, schools in rural areas, and schools with broad language and cultural diversity," says one passage of the 2001-2005 "Statement of Work."[18] The RELs must also develop "strategies to utilize schools as critical components in reforming education and revitalizing rural communities in the United States."[19] Finally, each lab's governing board should include "individuals representing the interests of students in economically disadvantaged areas, both rural and urban."[20]

Similar requirements have previously been part of the RELs' agreement, however. Under the 1996 contract, 25 percent of the entire lab program budget was to be dedicated to rural district services, a stipulation that survives in the 2001 agreement. Yet, the Department of Education has been hard-put to show adequate monitoring of this spending guideline. While ORAD can point to some impressive rural programs by individual labs (which are obligated to assess their own services to rural constituencies), there is currently no coordinated dissemination of rural-specific lab products to rural districts, no close monitoring of funds dedicated to "rural" at the national level, no coordinated nationwide effort of "rural" as an object of examination, nor any national program focusing exclusively on rural education issues.

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[17] Stern, Joyce D. "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools" p. 2

[18] "Statement of Work: Regional Educational Laboratories For Research, Development, Dissemination And Technical Assistance." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 2000. Task 2, Background.

[19] "Educational Research, Development, Dissemination and Improvement Act of 1994." Washington, DC: 103rd U.S. Congress. Part D, Section 941 (h).

[20] "Statement of Work: Regional Educational Laboratories For Research, Development, Dissemination And Technical Assistance." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 2000 Subtask 5.1: Governance.

OERI's Rural Successes

Researchers have tried to establish a "rural education research agenda" at least since 1984, but no effort seems to have been dynamic enough — or well funded enough — to capture the research community as a whole. Successes in rural research have been as isolated as some rural communities.

Researchers have tried to establish a "rural education research agenda" at least since 1984, but no effort seems to have been dynamic enough — or well funded enough — to capture the research community as a whole.

"We've got all kinds of agendas," observed Theodore Coladarci. "Whether there's any follow-through, whether they get support from the feds, whether the researchers approach these questions with measured objectivity. These are the questions..."

In 1991, the Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) Subcommittee on Rural Education, convened by OERI, identified six priority topics representing the most compelling concerns of rural education. FICE issued a pamphlet to stimulate researchers to study rural education issues. "Agenda for Research and Development of Rural Education" was seen at the time as a "strong commitment" to "parity" in rural schools by the U.S. Department of Education. (Larsen, 1993). Another study by AEL, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the 1991 "Agenda" had "received little comment or discussion in professional circles."[21]

Since that time, OERI has focused on rural education in two ways that deserve attention here. The first was the 1994 publication of the already-cited "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools," edited by OERI research specialist Joyce Stern; the second was a "Rural Education Issues Meeting" of education research professionals, held by the "At-Risk" Institute in 1996.

The Stern report was a unique analysis that consumed substantial office resources, according to OERI staff members who said the report required four years and the commissioning of at least eight new works of research — presumably with discretionary, non-competitive funds. "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools" is comprehensive and has been hailed as a key document by many working in the field.

The Stern report is quickly becoming dated, however. In contrast to the decade it covers (1980-1990), the past ten years have witnessed one of the most robust growth cycles in the history of the U.S. economy. Rural regions have benefited unevenly from this economic expansion, raising questions about its effect on schools and other public programs.[22] An update of the 1994 report was under discussion at OERI in 2000. That effort was later abandoned, according to officials, who pointed to a new rural research website (www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/) in which OERI gave assistance.

The other significant OERI contribution to "rural" was the 1996 convening, by the "At-Risk" Institute, of a "Rural Education Issues Meeting" of 23 professionals in education and government. Eight speakers delivered presentations on aspects of rural education, followed by a discussion period, all

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[21] Hambrick, Kimberly; and others. "Priorities for Research and Development with Rural, Small Schools: Results of a Modified Delphi Study with a Panel of Rural Researchers." Occasional Paper No. 35. Charleston, WV: Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 1993.

[22] Huang, Gary G. "Sociodemographic Changes: Promise and Problems for Rural Education." ERIC Digest. Charleston, West Virginia: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. 1999. ERIC document ED425048

toward developing common agreement on how rural education research might progress.[23] Presenters included: Paul Nachtigal, Robin Lambert, Craig Howley, Daryl Hobbs, Elizabeth Tuckermanty and Janet Edwards, Michael Arnold, Hobart Harmon, and Theodore Coladarci.

A summary of the event, "Proceedings of the Rural Education Issues Meeting," includes a list of characteristics that participants identified as "uniquely rural." Discussion also emphasized the need to support rural districts, which "have much to offer in terms of organization, curriculum, sense of place, and value of community."[24]

The meeting's participants also came up with critical R&D questions and issues. Of these, the top five were:

- What are the characteristics of effective rural education and schooling with regard to reinforcing the community rather than destroying it?;
- What are the impediments to achieving the new schooling paradigm in rural schools?;
- What structural features of small organizational scale contribute to student and community sense of self-efficacy?;
- What constitutes productive rural education that allows students to function in either rural or urban settings? and;
- How are rural schools making the connection between pedagogy/curriculum and the value of 'place?'

Finally, participants at the meeting identified specific actions the "At-Risk" Institute could and should take in the area of rural education. These actions are worth noting here:

- Using extant databases to investigate some of the research questions raised during the meeting;
- Producing synthesis documents on rural education research;
- Showcasing some important topics in research, including "block-scheduling" and "school size;"
- Helping to enhance the quality of NCES datasets by better defining the term "rural;"
- Supporting projects, research, and ideas that included the community as an aspect of the rural education system;
- Sponsoring activities or programs that support researchers of rural education, including developing a network of people to discuss important issues;
- Continuing to engage the present group in defining the issues involved in rural research;
- Expanding the current conversation to include others whom are doing fundamental thinking in the area of rural education;
- Engaging practitioners in action research;
- Helping rural communities become involved in designing policies that make sense;
- Collaborating with other organizations and agencies on rural education issues, including the National Science Foundation (Rural Systemic Initiative) and the Annenberg Foundation (Rural Challenge); and
- Developing a list-serv devoted to the topic of rural education.

Conclusions

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[23] "Proceedings of the Rural Education Issues Meeting, November 18, 1996." Prepared by Pelavin Research Institute, Washington, DC, for the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students, OERI.
[24] Ibid.

Whether the existing federal infrastructure for educational research, or its reformed successor, can and will respond to the most recent calls for better and more research in rural areas remains questionable, at best. As with public school systems themselves, legislators and policy makers are subjecting the entire education research apparatus to scrutiny, criticism and calls for further consolidation and standardization. Information gatherers are increasingly being directed toward "problem-centered" research with the broadest possible application in the field. These changes — effectively a research consolidation — tend to abandon responsibility for "targeted" populations like "rural," to the agendas of private, regional and state-based organizations. While proponents argue that federal research should serve the largest possible number of students and schools, the consolidation trend is unfortunate. Good research (and, for that matter, democracy) doesn't necessarily favor widely "marketable" outcomes, and is at least as much about understanding social differences as creating homogeneity.

Without strong advocacy at the highest levels of the Department of Education and Congress, rural education research will likely continue to be relegated to the fringe. Joyce Stern, who retired in 1994 after 26 years at OERI, said people "at all levels of policy making" need to be reminded about rural schools — both their challenges and, especially, their assets.

"[T]hose in a position to do so — like the laboratories, CEDaR [now the National Educational Knowledge Industry Association], and NREA — need continually to remind federal decision makers that rural schools deserve equitable attention," she wrote. "But calls for help must be balanced with information about high-quality rural schools. Friends of rural education did much during my years at OERI to bring new respect for rural education as something far more than the country cousin to be looked down upon...."[25]

At this time, advocates for rural schools can find good work on a variety of fronts. Principal among these is the Congress, where reauthorization of OERI — the federal educational research infrastructure — is currently on the table. The 1994 authorization included numerous admonitions and mandates favoring rural communities and schools. Will this attention to "rural" survive in the 2001 authorization? Is it too much to hope that attention to rural issues might become more focused? Is there a legislative or administrative remedy to the de facto categorization of "rural" within "at risk?" Might not rural issues be better-placed under the purview of another Institute — or perhaps even within a separate office that monitors and cultivates work across OERI's traditional "curricula," somehow influencing and bridging the work of all Institutes and the labs?

On another side, advocates may also do their constituents a favor by exploring more ways that their community institutions — especially those "that have been historically underutilized in Federal educational research activities" — can benefit from rural education research, both public and private. How do rural research needs converge with or diverge from those felt by urban areas; how might these research needs be met by various organizations, including universities, the Regional Education Laboratories, the R&D Centers, and by applicants for FIS grants, past and present, successful and otherwise?

It has been shown here how "rural" has been written into work descriptions of OERI, its Institutes, RELs and other programs. However, mere mention of intent to serve rural populations and

[25] Stern, Joyce. "Reflections of a Recently Retired Federal Analyst in Rural Education." n.p.

schools — with no monitored funding — does little service. Obligations are met according to the amount of time and energy that people can invest. The regional laboratories program is mandated to devote 25 percent of its collective budget to meet rural needs, yet there is no indication of adequate monitoring, nor any collective intent. (The question might be asked: Could not this 25 percent, amounting to at least $12 million a year, be used to create a single coordinated office, working specifically on rural issues in collaboration with each regional laboratory?)

Mere mention of intent to serve rural populations and schools—with no monitored funding—does little service.

On the local level, each lab is responsible to a governing board that should include representatives from lower-class, rural communities. Do these representatives exist and, if so, are they aware of the lack of research serving their constituent communities? Labs have created high-quality materials targeting rural educators and administrators, but are these materials adequately reaching their intended audiences?

Considering the many current changes being endured by rural America, attention to rural education research should become more focused. At the very least, rural organizations with similar agendas should explore ways of forming new coalitions, perhaps around individual issues, ultimately toward supporting more worthwhile education research in rural areas. One or more organizations might explore the feasibility of a national rural education research center. Calls also might be made to raise rural education issues to the status of "national focus" by establishing one or more administrative bodies and funding to match. Only by taking this kind of initiative, can rural education advocates help bring the rural education researcher off the "endangered list."

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